DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 861 FL 024 422

AUTHOR von Schmidt, Wolff
TITLE Reassessment of Business Courses in Foreign Languages: The European Union vis-a-vis Its Individual Members.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and Literatures (19th, Youngstown, OH, March 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advanced Courses; *Business Administration Education; *Cultural Awareness; Foreign Countries; French; German; Higher Education; Instructional Materials; International Trade; *Language of Instruction; *Languages for Special Purposes; Modern Languages; Newspapers; Political Science; Publications; *Second Languages; Serials; Spanish
IDENTIFIERS *European Union

ABSTRACT

The need for advanced (fourth-year) college business courses taught in foreign languages by foreign language teachers, and the design of such courses, are discussed. It is proposed that such courses be offered more often, generally in French, German, and Spanish and preferably over two semesters or three quarters, with a minimum of 3 contact hours per week. Rather than focusing narrowly on business within the target economy, the courses should provide a broader, overall European cultural overview but highlighting the target culture. Current magazines and other publications should be made available through subscription; several are specified for German-medium instruction. Due to recent political changes in Europe, course content may be problematic and current instructional materials scarce; advances in this area are anticipated. Some course topics needing modification or development in this context include political and economic geography, the history leading to establishment of the European Union, structure and functions of the European Union, social conventions and cultures of participating countries; and local (national) issues such as tourism, transportation, agriculture, employment, energy, and environment. Classroom presentation techniques are also suggested. Lists 20 reference publications. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 404 861

REASSESSMENT OF BUSINESS COURSES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES: THE EUROPEAN UNION *VIS-À-VIS* ITS INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS

Wolff von Schmidt, Ph.D.
Professor of German
Department of Languages and Literature
University of Utah

There is a plethora of proclaimed goals for business courses in a foreign language, many of which have achieved reasonable success. But there still exist numerous inconsistencies and gaps in the various curricula, largely caused by the ever more integrated economies and shrinking size of the world. This paper addresses business courses that are being offered in departments of Germanic and Romance languages, and, as is reasonable to expect of Slavic languages in the near future. Even though the focus of this paper is German, I truly believe that what I propose is broadly applicable to other target languages as well.

The underlying thought of my paper was probably best expressed, already over two hundred years ago, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau when he surmised that no matter how we look at it there are neither French nor Germans nor Spaniards, or even English, but there are only Europeans. In the last five years, three events have taken place which have changed the geographical map, and the social and economic landscape of Europe dramatically: First came about the unification of the two German states after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic in 1989, which eliminated a continuous trouble spot in the middle of Europe; then, on a much larger scale, a collapse occurred again, this time the USSR which totally unraveled its empire and brought about the end of the East-West conflict; and finally, the fact that many decades of reconciliation, negotiation and experimentation culminated in the transformation of a fragmented Europe into the European

FL024427

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Wolf von Schmidt

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Union, when in 1993 the Treaty of Maastricht went into effect, and thereby the majority of European nations were sealed together for the foreseeable future. Particularly nationalistic oriented cultural, economic, and political aspirations and concerns became in many ways obsolete, primarily on account of these historic happenings and the enormous technological advances in the last twenty years, notably in the field of communication. These fundamental changes in Europe mustn't go unrecognized in the curricula of our schools; as a matter of fact, it is the obligation of the teaching profession as a whole and of language teachers in particular to be in the forefront to insure that future generations think beyond national boundaries and governments in favor of a world community, or for the moment more modestly in favor of the European Union. Educators will need to confront the difficult task of conveying to students in a precarious balancing act, on the one hand, the great value and beauty of preserving a national identity and learning about their ancestral roots and, on the other hand, the great danger of nationalistic and chauvinistic pursuits in all aspects of their lives. Or, as Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany put it so succinctly, "We want unity within pluralism. We don't want a European central state which will result in the disappearance of regional and national traditions. In a united Europe we will retain our identity as Germans, French, or Danes."

This paper cannot possibly deal with all the many complex questions which evolve from these almost existential speculations. But it is possible to make a small contribution in form of focus and direction in the curriculum of business courses conducted in foreign languages. This presentation assumes that these courses are customarily offered in the fourth year of an undergraduate program, primarily in French, German, and Spanish, and over a period of at least one semester or two quarters with three or even more contact hours a week. However, and at this point it should be unequivocally stated that in the future this

kind of course should merit to be offered over a period of one year, i.e. for two semesters or three quarters with at least three contact hours per week. The reason for offering such a course on the fourth-year level is that every effort should be made to speak only in the target language, even though we face the fact that a great number of the technical terminology is derived from modern English. In the last three years in order to accomplish a more or less uninterrupted discussion in the target language, I have used for my course a text published in Germany and written for an international clientele: G. Nicolas et al., Wirtschaft - auf deutsch, Klett, 1991.). Although this text is by no means ideal for what I am proposing here, it however forces students to use constantly the target language. As would be expected, students will at first be hesitant if not outright reluctant to work with a text written exclusively in the target language, but it has been my experience, that not only after three weeks the initial fear is totally gone, but also that at the end of the course they are grateful for having had the opportunity to converse in German without reference to English.

While present curricula are often too pointedly focused on the market forces of one single country with the result of a very narrow technical, i.e. economic scope, this proposal suggests a broader, more European, cultural and even historical approach. With the ascent of a united Europe, students should be confronted with a more comprehensive European-oriented accent, in the target language and with an emphasis on the target culture.

Aside from the actual content of such a course, the issue of resource materials needs to be addressed. To start with, a number of magazines and newspapers should be subscribed by the respective departments, resource centers, or libraries and made easily accessible to students. Possible choices for a German course are the newsmagazines Der Spiegel and/or

Focus, the weekly papers Die Zeit and The European, which is published in English and therefore useful not just to the German Department, and perhaps the Sunday edition of a paper like Die Neue Zürcher Zeitung. Since we are living in times of limited resources, it is not always easy to convince departments or libraries to purchase such items, but it is my personal experience that embassies and/or consulates often can be persuaded to assist in these matters. Furthermore businesses with a stake in such a course might also be inclined to make a contribution toward such a goal. Students should be encouraged to obtain, on their own and free of charge, publications from the embassies or consulates of the appropriate countries. E.g. the weekly periodical Deutschland Nachrichten published in German and English is most helpful. In addition, students need to be motivated to read regularly at least the political and business sections of their local paper(s) and at least once in a while a national paper like The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, or The Atlanta Constitution. Then, the much reviled television offers a selection of programs which lend themselves very well to inform students on international business oriented issues. I suggest programs like CNN International Hour, Deutsche Welle, European Journal, Newshour with Jim Lehrer, Moneywise, Moneyline, and Wall Street Week.

When we now turn to the question of what the syllabus for such a course should contain, a number of things need to be said at the outset. First of all, it is no secret that some of our colleagues are rather skeptical about the introduction of such courses or any others which stray away from the traditional curriculum. Clearly, the fear that we will slowly be turned into service departments is a legitimate concern and should be carefully guarded against. At the same time enrollment in several languages is down, notably in French and German, and more and more students are asking for additional courses outside of the realm of literature

and specifically for some which have practical applications. A healthy compromise needs to be struck between the traditionally humanistic oriented curriculum which will continue to be the foundation of a university education and the demand by students to prepare them for the market place of the next century.

This reluctance on the part of faculty is also understandable from the fact that almost all of us are exclusively trained in literature and philology and therefore feel uncomfortable, if not outright incompetent in dealing with this type of courses. In short, the qualifications of instructors to teach these business courses are frequently very modest at best. Nevertheless, this problem is becoming less and less critical due to the many seminars which are offered within this country and abroad to prospective instructors of business courses. It also needs to be said that we want by no means to compete with what business colleges are doing, but rather that we should make the effort to supplement their curriculum, and hopefully do so in collaboration with their faculty.

The next point which ought to be made is that the curriculum is still in most cases quite problematic. Due to the many political changes in recent years and the very different and experimental directions which these courses have taken there is practically no uniform approach. Instructors, authors, publishers and outside advisers from the business community need to get together to assist each other in an effort to establish a curriculum which will lead to an effective course or sequence of courses. There is an urgent need for an agreement as to the level and content of business courses. It cannot be expected of instructors to rewrite practically every text before they can actually teach such a course. Political, social and economic events have been moving so rapidly that it is likely that it will take still some time before a unanimous perspective and approach can be reached. But

surely, once the present upheavals subside, more up-to-date curricula from the point of view of content and methodology will follow.

Following the previous arguments it is clear that a reorientation and reassessment of business courses in foreign languages will have to take place with an even more global approach in the future than just with Europe in mind in order to better prepare students for an international business career. As it is, this paper cannot even begin to discuss the enormous social and economic consequences for the world community which are being brought about by the NAFTA, APEC and GATT Agreements of the last two years. How small the world has become in this age of instantaneous communication can well be seen when you watch CNN International, a program in which the United States and Western Europe, our traditional points of orientation, are only two blocks in a rather large jigsaw puzzle. (In the United States this channel can at this moment only be received in Spanish.) One benefit of all these dramatic changes might well be that it might convince students of the immeasurable value, practical as well as abstract, of knowing a second or even a third language.

Allow me now to elaborate on some topics which are typical for business courses and how I propose to modify them. Most textbooks deal in their first chapter with the topography and economic geography of the target country or countries. I submit that the information found in most textbooks is totally insufficient for this day and age. It is probably safe to assume that the average American student is not too familiar with the topographical, political and economic geography of the country whose language is being studied, and it is probably more likely that students know even less about the same geographical aspects of other countries of the European continent. I therefore recommend that sufficient time is

spent to introduce students to these important characteristics both from the point of view of the target country as well as from the point of view of the United States. If you have any doubts about the merits of this suggestion I propose that you ask your students some of the following questions: Where in relation to Paris is Marseilles located?, Via which major German city do you go by train from Amsterdam to Prague?, Which are the three major navigable rivers in Europe?, Which is the most important industry in terms of jobs to the German economy?, Which industry is of critical significance to both countries, Spain and Norway?, Which country is the largest European trading partner of the United States?, How many European constitutional monarchies do you know?, and, Which German state celebrates more religious holidays than any other? You would probably agree that this list could be continued *ad infinitum*, and you would probably also agree that these kind of questions can easily be discussed in any target language since they do not require a very high degree of proficiency but that they are absolutely necessary knowledge in a business course focusing on any European country.

The second lesson of my proposed course, and here I deviate from all textbooks which I am familiar with, gives a concise history which leads to the European Union as agreed upon in Maastricht and put into effect in 1993. Obviously a lesson of this type cannot fail to mention the visionary plan of the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman who in 1950 proposed to pool the French and German coal and steel industries, and how in 1951 the European Community for Coal and Steel was founded with the Benelux States, France, Germany and Italy as its members. Such a lesson should certainly also show how out of this Community of Six resulting from the treaty of Rome (1957) and its expansion to the North by Denmark, Great Britain and Ireland (1973), and its expansion to the South by Greece (1981), and then Portugal and Spain (1986) a community of twelve was built which

then was once again expanded in January of this year by adding three EFTA countries to that list, i.e. Austria, Finland, and Sweden. Even though much more has to be added to this chapter it nevertheless doesn't need to be a dry history lesson but, if presented creatively, can show an exciting process of developing a new historical entity not unlike the founding of the United States of America. As a matter of fact, all along the way it can and should be pointed out that the United States were there not only as a historical model but also as a helpful friend and partner in this most difficult undertaking.

The next step, once again a lesson which needs to be put together by the instructor until new textbooks have been published, shows how the European Union as a supranational governmental body functions and how decision are made. In this context the various branches of its government such as the European Council, the Council of Ministers, the Commission, the European Parliament, and the recently created Eurobank need to be explained. Once again, it will become clear that some knowledge of the economic and political circumstances of all the members of the European Union is necessary. In this connection it might be helpful to explain the parliamentary form of government as opposed to the presidential form. From my experience there are always some students who do not know the difference and therefore do not understand, for instance, why governments in Europe fall or what a coalition government is.

One of the subsequent lessons which is fundamental to a course like the one I propose, deals with the social conventions and the cultures of the individual countries. In order for students to understand that there is strength in versatility they need to be confronted with as many differences in behavior and beliefs as possible while at the same time they need to be taught tolerance and respect for these different approaches to life. Some of the more

obvious topics which need to be discussed are: What to do when you meet a person for the first time? What to do or not to do if you are invited to a private home? How do you behave at a dining table? How do you dress for local standards? What do you do when you conduct and conclude a purchase? How do you begin and end a telephone conversation? What are the religious conventions in a certain country and what ramifications can you expect from them? All of these topics ought to be introduced in a contrastive manner *vis-à-vis* American usage. Additionally, role playing can be a major component for some of these issues.

Other topics like tourism, transportation, agriculture, employment, energy, environment and many more can and should be approached as much as possible from a broader, more "European" perspective after the idiosyncratic characteristics of the target country have been explored. Some topics, as we have seen earlier, are first and foremost European by their nature and others like those above are characterized primarily by regional and national attributes. There are many more topics which could be added to this list, the extent to which they need to be studied depends on the target country. There is no more a prescribed or absolute formula for this course than there is for any other course, but business courses should be as much as possible a reflection not only of the microcosm but of the macrocosm as well.

Before concluding, I would like to make a few practical suggestions on how to conduct such a course. Over the years I found most helpful to start every class session with an introductory period of no more than fifteen minutes which is devoted to the discussion of economic and political news items pertaining to Germany and Europe as a whole, especially as they have an effect on the United States. This process has the additional

advantage that the instructor will quickly be able to notice those students who follow the news through newspapers, newsmagazines, and/or television and those who need to be encouraged to do so. Initially instructors might want to start with more or less "local" news like the Dow Jones Index and from there perhaps proceed to the currency exchange rates of some major currencies. This will lead invariably to a discussion of why, what, who and when.

In addition to the above mentioned course requirements, I also expect most of the written exercises in the textbook to be handed in at previously agreed upon deadlines, but only after extensive discussions in class. Finally, there is the research project. Every student is required to work for the whole quarter or semester on a topic of her/his choice the results of which are presented in the target language in form of a fifteen minutes report to the whole class followed by a discussion period . An expanded version of this project is due at the end of the quarter/semester in English as a research paper. Some students select their topics in close consultation with me and do the work over several weeks under my supervision, while other students work quite independently.

It was the purpose of my presentation and my hope that some of these suggestions will help make your business course in a foreign language more challenging and productive to you and your students.

WORKS CITED

Austrian Information. Monthly periodical. Austrian Press and Information Service. 3524 International Court., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008-3035.

CNN International Hour. Television program.

Der Spiegel. Weekly newsmagazine, published in Germany.

Deutsche Welle. Television program.

Deutschland Nachrichten. Weekly periodical, published in German and English. German Information Center. 950 Third Ave., New York, NY. 10022.

Deutschland: Zeitschrift für Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Wissenschaft, Number 4, August 1994.

Die Neue Zürcher Zeitung. Daily newspaper, published in Switzerland.

Die Zeit. Weekly newspaper, published in Germany.

European Journal. Television program.

Focus. Weekly newsmagazine, published in Germany.

Moneyline. Television program.

Moneywise Television program.

Newshour with Jim Lehrer. Television program.

Nicolas G., et al., Wirtschaft - auf deutsch, Klett, 1991.

The Atlanta Constitution. Daily newspaper.

The European. Weekly newspaper, published in Great Britain.

The Los Angeles Times. Daily newspaper.

The New York Times. Daily newspaper

The Wall Street Journal. Daily newspaper.

Wall Street Week. Daily newspaper.